



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range (434) 982-2815 trc-uva@virginia.edu <http://www.virginia.edu/~trc/>

Fall 1996

Teaching Tip:

Pop Quizzes Students Like

by Toni Wegner, Associate Professor, Dept. of Psychology

Although as a student I seriously disliked pop quizzes, the night before my first Research Methods and Data Analysis lecture I needed a plan. Over the past few semesters, students had become lax about attendance for my 9:30 a.m. lecture class of about 100 students. I decided to give "Comprehension Checks," a new name for a regular pop quiz, and the students' initial response was less than enthusiastic.

Comprehension checks were short unannounced quizzes, given once every week or two. There were 3-4 questions, usually fill-in-the-blanks or multiple choice, which covered the major points from the previous lecture. I put the questions on an overhead. After the quiz, students graded their own papers (and signed the pledge) as we discussed the answers.

The crucial factor that made the comprehension checks a positive experience was that they could only help, not hurt, students' grades. Since I came up with the plan after the syllabus was printed, I couldn't factor them in as part of the course grade. Instead, I announced that I would sum the comprehension check points at the end of the semester. Those whose comprehension check scores were in the top half of the class would have their mid-term/final percentage weighting (normally 60/40) automatically reweighted ten percent in the direction that benefitted them

most (i.e., 70/30 or 50/50).

For the small cost of entering scores into my spreadsheet, the benefits (some unanticipated) were tremendous:

- ◆ Class attendance was better;
- ◆ Students were generally better prepared for class;
- ◆ Students got feedback about what they didn't understand;
- ◆ Students got practice on concepts covered on exams;
- ◆ I had records of which students missed some classes;
- ◆ Students got instant negative feedback when they missed a previous class;
- ◆ I got feedback about what I hadn't explained well enough;
- ◆ Exam scores were higher than in previous semesters.

Course grades were not much different than without the reweighting, mostly because mid-term and final grades were similar. By the middle of the semester, students forgot the details of the incentive and remembered only that it was important to attend class and keep up with the material.

Several students commented positively about the comprehension checks on the final evaluations; no one complained. The checks were a rare win-win situation.